

David Sauder, January 18, 2015

“Reflections from the bottom of the staircase”

When Worship Committee asked the Elders to plan this Sunday, and told us of the theme of “This Present Darkness,” I piped up and allowed as how I just might have had a recent experience which could speak to the theme of finding hope, inspiration, and light in an otherwise dark time, so I volunteered to speak.

For those of you who are visiting, or who have only started attending MFM within the last year, my dark time began ten months ago yesterday, when I was leaving my house for work on a Monday morning, and tripped over something – my own two feet? I’ll never know for sure – and fell, headfirst, down a flight of 18 stairs. I suffered eight fractures in the fall – three in my neck, two in my back, my right wrist, my nose, and a rib; as well as facial lacerations and bruising all over my body. I had to have surgery to fuse my cervical spine and to put pins into my wrist. That day, St. Patrick’s Day, March 17, 2014, was the darkest day of my life. It was frightening and painful.

But I determined early on, on that first day, not to be one of these people who asks, “Why me?” First of all, it drives me crazy when other people ask that question, and my first reaction, when I hear it, is to ask, “Why somebody else?” And secondly it’s a question guaranteed to invoke self-pity, and I knew, even then, that feeling sorry for myself wasn’t going to help in my recovery. So I determined not to ask “Why me?”

But questions are inevitable when one goes through a life-changing event. So, instead of asking “Why?”, I asked, “what?” What lessons did God want me to learn from this experience? What could I find to be thankful for in these difficult circumstances?

I, of course, had lots of time to reflect on these questions, because I was in the hospital for eight weeks, and pretty much housebound for another eight weeks after I was released. Reflecting on lessons learned and being thankful is what helped me through those dark days, moving towards the light. I’d like to share some of those reflections with you this morning. And since they’re reflections I probably wouldn’t have made if I had not had the accident, I’ve entitled my meditation **“Reflections from the bottom of the staircase.”**

So let me begin with the things I found to be thankful for, and then I'll move on to the lessons learned.

I am first and foremost thankful for life itself. The kind of accident I had could easily have been fatal. But it wasn't. Life is God's greatest gift to us, and I think we too often take it for granted. So there's nothing like a brush with death to make one thankful for life.

I'm thankful that I can still walk. The kind of injury I sustained is the kind that puts people in wheelchairs, and indeed on ventilators, for the rest of their lives. So I am thankful that, as severe as my injuries were, my spinal cord was not injured.

I'm thankful that I had a four-month rest. We had an Elders' meeting the day before my accident. During our Elders' meetings we usually take some time to "elder" each other and talk about our personal needs. I mentioned to the others that day about how tired I was feeling, working hours that were too long, and how I needed a rest. So I'm thankful that I got the rest I needed.

I'm thankful for the snow that fell the week before my accident. Now, I have to confess that I wasn't very thankful for the snow when it fell. As a matter of fact, I'm fairly certain I grumbled about it. Yet that snow covered the very last step at the bottom of my staircase – the only concrete one. So instead of hitting my head on concrete at the end of my fall, I landed on a snow bank. So now I am thankful for the very snow I cursed when it fell.

I am thankful for kind and helpful neighbors. A neighbor I didn't know before saw me fall, called 911 on her cell phone for me, called Marj for me, and waited with me until the ambulance arrived. When she saw me shivering from the cold, she ran into her house and got a blanket to cover me with. Other neighbors, again people who were strangers to me, helped gather my belongings that had gone flying as I fell, and stayed with me and spoke comforting words until the EMTs came and put me in the ambulance.

I am thankful for competent and caring health care professionals – EMTs, doctors, nurses, orderlies, physical therapists, occupational therapists – people who work long hours on their feet with irregular shifts, and do so, for the most part, with kindness and patience.

I am thankful for our often-maligned Canadian healthcare system. If I had had this accident in my native USA, the cost for my care would have run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and I would have had to find a way to pay it.

I am thankful for my family. It turns out that, when you break your neck, you want your mommy, and my parents made the journey despite the difficulties that the trip entailed, given their advancing years. And I am also thankful for my brothers and sister and my extended family and friends, who supported me financially and in prayer during my recovery. I got cards, flowers, and phone calls from people I hadn't heard from in years, and I had people praying for me who didn't even know me, because one of my relatives or friends asked them to pray for me.

I am thankful for the gift of song. Some of these hymns that we are singing today helped sustain me through that time. I had some hymns with good old-fashioned Mennonite four-part harmonies on my computer, and I would listen to them frequently. I sang (or repeated to myself, at least) "I owe the Lord a morning song" every day during my hospitalization. "I owe the Lord a morning song of gratitude and praise, for the kind mercies he has shown in lengthening out my days. He kept me safe another night – I see another day..." Those hymns helped me to express my feelings and to keep my faith during my recovery.

I am most of all thankful for a caring and faithful church community. The way you supported me in my recovery left me amazed and humbled. It felt like I had no sooner arrived in the emergency room than people from MFM started appearing at my bedside, and it continued for two months. In the eight weeks I was in the hospital, I believe there were only two days where I did not receive a visitor. But it wasn't just the visiting. You supported me in practical ways. On the first day, when the ER nurses were too busy to clean me up, Rebecca cleaned the dried blood from my face. You brought me books to read – but when I was too tired to hold a book in front of my face, Margaret Berry read aloud to me from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When I had no internet connectivity at the rehab hospital, Kit printed out my Facebook messages and brought them to me, and let me type my messages which she posted when she got back home. Even Jen Otto and Greg Rabus, from Germany, found a way to support – they purchased Tim Hortons gift cards online to give to those who were visiting and supporting me.

I'm thankful for the most meaningful prayer service I've ever been to. Right after my surgery I began thinking of the James passage that was read, and asked for a Bible so I could read it, and decided that I would ask for anointing with oil for healing. (Part of my thought process was, if you're not going to do this for a

broken neck, what are you saving it for?) So the Sunday after my accident, John, Gary, Lydia, my parents, my brother Jerry, and Marj all gathered in my room in the ICU, and John anointed me with oil, and everyone prayed for my healing. That was the moment when I felt in my soul that everything would be all right.

Now, Paul, in the Thessalonians passage that was read, exhorts us to give thanks for everything. I can't honestly say that I'm thankful for breaking my neck. But I am thankful for so much of what surrounds that experience, and for the lessons I've learned.

So what are those lessons? I'm not sure I can name them all, but here are a few.

It has been said that laughter is the best medicine, and one of the lessons I learned was that, even in the most trying and frightening of circumstances, things can still be funny. One of the things I found humor in was watching peoples' expressions when they saw me for the first time. I was a mess – two black eyes, lacerations on my face, a stiff collar on my neck – such a mess that, when Rebecca first came to the hospital, she walked right past my gurney in the ER without recognizing me. So after I'd been there a couple of days, and had had my surgery, I took a perverse delight in watching people try to disguise the look of horror on their faces when they first laid eyes on me. Most of you weren't very successful at it, and I found it amusing.

Another lesson I learned was one of patience. Recovery from the kind of injury I had is a long, slow process. So I had to learn to wait, and to be content with baby steps (both figurative and literal).

I learned that our mothers were right and that “please” and “thank you” really are magic words, and that health care providers don't hear them very often, and that if you use those words with nurses and orderlies you suddenly become their favorite patient and they bend over backwards to do things for you.

I also learned about sacrificial caring. There were three examples of sacrificial caring that I want to talk about. The day of my accident was the first day of spring break at Dawson College. Now, I know how much I look forward to my days off. But Rebecca sacrificed her spring break, and came to my bedside, and stayed there for three days. She cleaned my face, she held my hand, she answered my questions and helped me understand what was going on, she fed me soup when I had no appetite and no strength to eat. And then she apologized for having to go out of

town to attend the memorial service for her college roommate. Thank you, Rebecca, for your sacrificial caring.

And Marj sacrificed her own private life to take care of what I couldn't. She cared for my dog, she brought me things I needed from home, she checked my mail, she cared for my house, and generally helped keep my affairs in order. Thank you, Marj, for your sacrificial caring.

The third example of sacrificial caring was on Easter. As it became clear that I would still be in the hospital over Easter, I knew I really wanted to sing those beloved songs of joy that we sing on Easter, so I asked if it would be possible for a few people to come to my hospital room after the Easter service on Sunday, and sing those hymns. I knew that people would be busy on that day, planning family meals and gatherings, but I allowed myself to dare to hope that as many as ten people might be able to make it, so there would be a decent group to sing. I even allowed myself to hope that one of them might be a tenor so we could have all four parts, but quite frankly I wasn't holding my breath on that one. Well, Easter afternoon rolled around, and people started coming in – and coming, and coming, and coming – until the group of ten that I had hoped for was multiplied and my hospital room was jammed with not ten, but twenty-five people who came to sing with me. And the last who walked in were the Leenders-Cheng family, and they stood beside me and Thomas sang tenor right in my ear. Thank you all who sacrificed your Easter family time to give me the joy of singing those hymns.

So I learned about sacrificial caring, and can only aspire to care for others in the way that you have cared for me.

And I learned another lesson about caring. I learned about the second half of the first verse of the hymn we sang this morning, and that we sing frequently – “pray that I might have the grace to let you be my servant, too.” I learned how important it is to accept the help, to accept the servanthood, to accept the sacrificial caring that others offer – that the gracious acceptance of these gifts is itself an act of caring for those who are doing the serving.

The final lesson I want to speak about this morning is one that I learned about this fellowship. I have long loved this group – I wouldn't have stayed here for 34 years if I didn't – but as you know, my accident happened during a period when we were doing hard work on getting over an intense conflict. And of course, part of that work was looking at what we had done wrong and how not to fall into the same patterns that had not served us well. So we'd spent a lot of time looking at what we

didn't do well. But this experience showed me that we have some great strengths here at MFM, and there are some things that we do very well. When I fell, there were no factions when it came to visiting me, no one had to consult a process document to see what they ought to do. People just spontaneously and joyfully sprang into action. To be sure, there had to be some organization of visiting schedules and the like, but I felt supported and cared for in a way that to this day, as I said before, amazes and humbles me. And people noticed – nurses, orderlies, other patients. Many people told me, “You certainly have a lot of friends!” and I explained that these were people from my church. It was a powerful witness to the love of Jesus that you made to the world.

It's hard to know how to conclude a meditation like this. So maybe I'll just let Paul's words to the Romans speak, and I have a little hesitation in using it because it's sometimes used to clobber people over the head who are going through tough times. But the words helped to sustain me during my recovery, and so I'm going to repeat them again today: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”